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ABSTRACT

It has been suggested that adolescents in the United States do not get enough individual attention and guidance from adults. This study was conducted to investigate the relationships adolescents have with adult friends or mentors. Eighth- and ninth-grade students (N=299) completed anonymous surveys about discussing important things with other adolescents, adult relatives, or mentors. In addition, 21 mentors and 11 adolescents were interviewed. The results revealed that the majority of the students (87.3%) reported discussing important things with other adolescents; many students (67.2%) discussed important topics with adult relatives; but fewer students (31.4%) discussed important things with a teacher, coach, or neighbor. Almost all respondents reported that they could imagine a mentor, and that person would be encouraging, goal-directed, and inspiring. Several sex differences were found, with girls being more likely than boys to discuss important things with adult relatives of the same sex, to discuss friendship with peers and adults, and to feel helped by friends, relatives, and mentors. In interviews, adolescents reported wanting an adult friend who would be easy to talk to and trustworthy. Mentors who were interviewed stressed the importance of being open and trustworthy. Their advice to other adults was to give an adolescent honest, supportive praise and help the adolescent to find his or her own solutions to problems. (NB)

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Young Adolescents Describe the Encouraging Adult Who Would Listen to Them

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Abstract

Most of 299 young adolescents responded on a survey that they discussed important things with other young people, but few reported having adult friends (mentors). Almost all responded that they could imagine such a mentor, and that person would be encouraging, goal-directed, and inspiring. In interviews, adolescents wanted an adult who would be easy to talk to and trustworthy. Twenty-one mentors, including teachers and coaches, stressed the importance of being open and trustworthy. Their advice to other adults was to give an adolescent honest, supportive praise and help the individual to find his/her own solutions.

According to Elkind (1984) one of the reasons that there are so many American teenagers in crisis today is that they need, but don't have, enough individual attention, guidance, and direction from adults. Although adolescents regularly talk with each other, daily conversations with potential role models such as teachers, counselors and coaches are rare (Newman & Newman, 1986; Czikszentmihalyi & Reed,1984).

In the present study adolescents were asked to describe an adult friend (mentor). In addition, adult mentors provided suggestions for establishing successful relationships with adolescents.

Method

The participants were 299 8th and 9th grade students who completed an anonymous survey and 21 mentors and 11 adolescents who were interviewed. The survey participants attended economically diverse suburban schools with 25% of the students being non-white. The mentors included youth group leaders, counselors, teachers, and coaches; the youth who were interviewed were 13 or 14 years old.

Permission for the survey was granted by research review boards, school officials, parents, and adolescents. The survey asked the adolescents if they talked "about important things" with other teenagers, adult relatives, and mentors (see Figure 1). Those students who did not discuss "important things" with adult non-relatives were asked to imagine what a mentor would be like.

Results

Survey

Most of the students (87.3%) discussed "important things" such as school, dating, and peer pressure with a friend. Many of the students (67.2%) discussed important topics with adult relatives, but fewer students (31.4%) with a teacher, coach, or neighbor. However, all but three students were able to imagine the qualities of a mentor. According to Cochran Q tests, both boys and girls envisioned the imaginary adult mentor as more humorous, inspiring and goal-directed than family and friends (for boys, $Q(2) = 21.00$, $p < .001$, $Q(2) = 18.29$, $p < .001$, $Q(2) = 30.87$, $p < .001$; for girls, $Q(2) = 26.00$, $p < .001$, $Q(2) = 29.03$, $p < .001$, $Q(2) = 47.48$, $p < .001$).

Several differences were observed between boys' and girls' responses. For example, more

girls than boys discussed "important things" with adult relatives of their same sex (X^2 (1,N=200) = 62.74, p <.001). Girls more often discussed friendship with peers and adults (Table 2).Many girls, but fewer boys, felt helped by friends, relatives and mentors (Table 3). For girls, the imagined adult mentor would be easier to get along with, less judgmental, more cheerful, and would share their experiences more than peers and family, Q (2) = 26.35, p < .001 Q (2) = 23.03, p < .001, Q (2) = 23.72, p < .001, Q (2) = 18.50, p < .001. For boys, the imagined adult mentor would be more intelligent, caring, encouraging, and would help them look at themselves honestly more than peers and family, Q (2) = 30.08, p < .001, Q (2) = 30.33, p < .001, Q (2) = 24.07, p < .001, Q (2) = 13.73, p < .001.

Interviews

In the interviews the mentors described the young adolescents as "developing bundles of exciting contradictions" in need of love and approval (Figure 3).They explained that adolescents have a strong desire to be part of the peer group, yet they want to assert their individuality. Several mentors reported that they had listened to adolescents discuss popularity, family relationships, feelings of inadequacy, and suicide. The mentors stressed the importance of being open, accepting, approachable, and trustworthy. Their advice to other adults was to give an adolescent honest, supportive praise and help the individual to find his/her own solutions. The adolescents wanted an adult who would be easy to talk to and trustworthy. They thought that adults might have better ideas because they've "gone through it."

Summary and Recommendations

Although most students had a friend to talk to, many wanted but did not have a mentor. Several differences between girls' and boys' responses were noted, but both boys and girls imagined an encouraging adult who would listen to them. The adolescents were seeking guidance from honest, accepting, and caring adults. Correspondingly, the mentors who were interviewed described themselves as patient, open, non-judgmental, empathic and tolerant of adolescents' changeability and moodiness.

The mentors' advice to other adults was to be available to adolescents and then "tune out the rest of the world to listen to them." Be willing to give advice, but don't try to solve their problems. Instead, "give them trust and a long leash."

Young adolescents describe the encouraging adult who would listen to them

Honest

Be there to talk about anything.

Encourages me

Intelligent

Listens to me

Trustworthy

Accepts me as I am

Caring

Humorous

Just someone to talk to when I'm mad at my parents

Gives me advice

Understanding

Dresses fashionably

Helps decide things

Tells me what I did wrong

Be a reliable friend that I can talk to when my friends put me down

Easy to get along with

Encouraging adults describe young adolescents

Developing bundles of exciting contradictions

Trying to fit in and at the same time express their individuality.

Immature adults

Fair is important to them.

Trying on new identities at a remarkable pace.

They want to be accepted.

Peer-oriented.

They think everyone else has all the fun.

Bouncing hormones.

Strong romantic idealistic impulse.

In some ways they are like sheep following their peers.

They can get on my nerves.

Give them trust and a long leash.

You have to be open with them.

Table 1. Important characteristics of adolescents' confidants

Qualities	Type of confidant: Teenager	Family member	Other adult	Imaginary
Intelligent	- -	B G	- G	B G
Trustworthy	- G	- G	- G	B G
Easy to get along with	B G	- -	- G	B G
Humorous	- G	- -	- G	B G
Athletic	- g	b g	- g	- g
Unshockable	b g	b g	b g	b -
Honest	- G	B G	B G	B G
Non-judgmental	b g	b -	- -	- -
Good looking	- -	b -	- -	b -
Caring	- G	B G	- G	- G
Understanding	- G	B G	- G	B G

G Girls significantly endorsed this item, binomial test, $p<.001$.

g Girls significantly rejected this item, binomial test, $p<.001$.

B Boys significantly endorsed this item, binomial test, $p<.001$.

b Boys significantly rejected this item, binomial test, $p<.001$.

- Neither significant endorsement, nor rejection of this item.

Table 2. Issues adolescents discuss with confidants

	Type of confidant			
Issues	Teenager	Family member	Other adult	Imaginary
School	B G	B G	B G	B G
Friendship	- G	- G	- G	- G
Sex	- -	- -	b -	- -
Pressure to succeed	b -	- -	- -	- -
Dating relationships	- G	- -	- -	- -
Physical changes	b g	b -	b g	b g
Politics	b g	b g	- g	b g
Family	- G	B G	- -	- -
Religion	b g	- -	- -	b g
Pressure to conform	b -	b -	- g	b -
Drugs/alcohol	- -	- -	- -	- -
Appearance	- G	- -	- -	- -

G Girls significantly endorsed this item, binomial test, $p<.001$.

g Girls significantly rejected this item, binomial test, $p<.001$.

B Boys significantly endorsed this item, binomial test, $p<.001$.

b Boys significantly rejected this item, binomial test, $p<.001$.

- Neither significant endorsement, nor rejection of this item.

Table 3. Ways adolescents are helped by confidants

	Type of confidant			
Ways helped	Teenager	Family member	Other adult	Imaginary
Cheers me up	- G	- -	- -	- G
Shares experiences	- G	- G	- -	- G
Helps me achieve goals	b g	- -	- -	- -
Helps me look at self honestly	b -	- -	- -	- -
Helps me learn skill	b g	- -	- -	- -
Reassures me	b -	- -	- -	- G
Encourages me	- G	- G	- G	B G
Listens to me	B G	B G	- G	B G
Inspires me	b g	- -	- -	- -
Gives me advice	- G	- G	- G	- G

G Girls significantly endorsed this item, binomial test, $p<.001$.

g Girls significantly rejected this item, binomial test, $p<.001$.

B Boys significantly endorsed this item, binomial test, $p<.001$.

b Boys significantly rejected this item, binomial test, $p<.001$.

- Neither significant endorsement, nor rejection of this item.

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